

Faith-to-Faith

Breaking Bread Together For Mutual Understanding

**An Interfaith Experience Sponsored by the
Multifaith Action Society of B.C. and the
North Shore Unitarian Church**

By

Maurice Gibbons

Building a Global Family of Faith

What dinner guests have said...

- It was such a fabulous evening! I loved meeting such a diverse group of people.
- The potluck idea is a great one! Such a wonderful variety of delicious foods from different cultures.
- What a great idea this Faith-to-Faith dinner is. I would never otherwise have had the opportunity to meet so many people of other faiths all in one place.
- Everyone was relaxed, and I really enjoyed learning something about other faiths.
- Our guests were all very friendly and participated actively in the evening.
- During our conversation over dinner, we discovered that although we were from four different faiths, we had more similarities than differences in our beliefs. What a great discovery!
- Our guests were all enthusiastic and appreciative. I can't wait to do it again!
- The conversation was lively and the food was superb!
- I enjoyed interesting conversations about the lives and faiths of other guests.

—The faith to faith dinner at our house was amazing. I consider it the best dinner I have ever attended.

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Copies of this booklet are available at the office of the

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Also available: The Multifaith Calenda

Forward

From the moment Maurice Gibbons joined the Board of The Multifaith Action Society, his defining preoccupation was that our programs should be effective, powerful and personally engaging, programs which would help people of differing faith traditions understand each other in a way that is sympathetic to differences and celebrative of the values they hold in common.

The big question for all of us was: “How do we engage our neighbors of different faiths in a significant conversation which will bring us mutual understanding and closer relationships as human beings?” Gibbons’ answer was the Faith to Faith dinner program. The Society agreed that breaking bread together and seeking mutual understanding is the very stuff of which spiritual community, indeed civil society, is built!

We publish this brief handbook in the hope that it will help people everywhere to organize their own dinners for people of differing faiths. The North Shore Unitarian Church, North Vancouver, B.C., organized the first dinners in 2005. The result was joy and enthusiasm that exceeded all expectations. Hence both the Multifaith Action Society and the NSUC have officially adopted the Faith to Faith dinner program.

We have also agreed to publish this modest handbook. We are delighted to bring it to you and hope you will freely evaluate your “Dinners” and send us your suggestions which will be considered for future editions.

Both the Multifaith Action Society of British Columbia and the North Shore Unitarian Church offer this program with pride and hope.

Rev. Barry Cooke,
The Board of Directors
The Multifaith Action Society

Seeking Unity in Diversity

In today's strife ridden world, where religious differences are often the root cause of conflict, it is difficult to see how reconciliation and healing can occur. Here at the North Shore Unitarian Church, we have found a joyful way of celebrating unity in diversity which serves as a model for all who believe that individual actions can affect the whole. It is a model based on understanding and tolerance, where small groups of people from different faiths can freely share their beliefs in an environment free of prejudice and judgement.

Starting with the premise that belief in a universal power greater than ourselves makes us a family, while recognizing that beliefs and ideas come in different colored hues, we invite you to join us in exploring the simple, yet profound concept of Faith to Faith Dinners.

Note:

In this booklet, the term "spiritual centre" will be used to replace such terms as church, temple, or any other reference to the place where people meet to worship.

The term "spiritual leader" will be used to refer to the Imam, preacher or other director of a spiritual centre.

The Dinner Recipe

A Faith to Faith Dinner involves eight people – two from four different religions. In 2006, for example, the dinners involved Bahai, Baptists, Sikhs and Unitarians. One couple invites the other couples to their home for a potluck dinner. In this case the Unitarian pair invited pairs from each of the other three faiths.

A number of dinners are usually held on the same night in a number of different homes. The members of one spiritual centre act as Dinner Hosts and invite guests from three other spiritual centres. In 2006, for example, the North Shore Unitarian Church hosted ten dinners in ten different homes on the same evening in

October and invited guests from the West Vancouver Baptist Church, the North Shore Bahai and members of the Vancouver Sikh Association. Eight people in ten homes – eighty people – took part in those Faith to Faith dinners.

During the organization of the 2005 dinners (the first), many questions arose about details of organizing contacts, the dinner and the discussion. As a result, we established a number of guidelines. There is nothing sacred about any of them, but we strongly suggest that anyone organizing Faith to Faith dinners seriously consider following them. They each serve a purpose and each worked well in our beginning experiences.

The purpose of these potluck dinners is conversation leading to mutual understanding and tolerance for different beliefs and practices.

Setting religious faith in this kind of personal context has a bold imperative – the hope that participants will meet as if the future of the world is in their hands, because in a small, but certain way, it is.



How Do The Dinners Get Started?

The groups of eight are organized by any spiritual centre that elects to participate. The “host spiritual centre” appoints a **Faith-to-Faith Dinner Organizer** (who I am tempted to call the Maitre Dei). The Dinner Organizer then selects two to four more spiritual centre members to form the **Faith-to-Faith Host Committee**.

The Host Committee begins by announcing the program to the congregation and inviting members to volunteer as **Dinner Hosts** at their homes. Host Committee members themselves should be Dinner Hosts to model participation in the program.

The Host Committee invites the Dinner Hosts to an Orientation Meeting at which the formalities and guidelines for a successful

Faith-to-Faith dinner are reviewed and discussed. At this meeting, the Dinner Hosts are given the names and contact information for six people from **three** other religious faiths. These people will be their guests at the potluck dinner that each host will arrange. A Tuesday evening has been chosen as the most appropriate time.

Who's Coming To Dinner?

The Host Committee decides which spiritual centres to approach for volunteer guests. The widest possible range of beliefs should be considered. For example, if the host spiritual centre is Christian, it should consider reaching outside the Christian community to include members of Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, First Nations, Unitarian, Baha'i and other faiths.

The Host Committee then decides how best to convey their invitation to participate. The basic approach is to contact the spiritual leader of each spiritual centre to seek his or her support for the program. If the spiritual leader agrees, he or she may recommend participation to the centre's board. If the board agrees, the spiritual leader may make the announcement to the congregation, or invite members of the Host Committee to attend a service and make the announcement about the program themselves. This process is repeated in each of the proposed guest spiritual centres.

A place and time to sign up is announced, and names of volunteer guests and their contact information are collected. If members of the Host Committee know how many Dinner Hosts they have, a corresponding number of guests can be requested, thus avoiding many volunteers being disappointed.

What Happens At The Orientation Meeting?

At the Orientation Meeting organized by the Host Committee, Dinner Hosts are given the names and contact information for two people from each of the spiritual centres involved. The

Dinner Hosts are asked to personally invite these people to the Faith-to-Faith Dinners.

The Host Committee describes the goals of the dinners and provides guidelines for conducting them successfully. A general discussion should follow, giving Dinner Hosts the opportunity to express their concerns and ask questions. In many cases the group as a whole will work together to resolve any difficulties that may be raised at this meeting. The Host Committee may demonstrate how to ask appropriate questions during the dinners -- questions that will guide the discussion and avoid provocative issues.

How Are The Dinners Conducted?

Each Faith-to-Faith dinner involves two Dinner Hosts and two guests from three other faiths for a total of eight people. Eight is a special number. No more or less should attend. Guests do not include the Dinner Host's family or other house residents.

The two Dinner Hosts may be a couple or simply two people from the host spiritual centre who agree to work together.

<p>"I'm glad that I had the guidelines. They gave me a framework to follow and worked out well."</p>
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The dinners are held at one of the Dinner Host's homes on a Tuesday evening between 6:30 and 9:30 p.m. for a total of three hours. One Dinner Host is appointed Master of Ceremonies (M.C).

The dinner begins with a 'breaking-the-bread' ceremony in which an appropriate loaf is provided by the M.C., who breaks off a piece of the bread and says:

"We break bread together, Faith-to-Faith, in pursuit of mutual understanding and affection among us".

The bread is then passed around the table for each guest to break off a piece and consume. The other Dinner Host then begins the dinner by lighting a candle and saying:

“May our conversation illuminate, with one clear light, all of the faiths that we hold”.

These words are symbolized by the light of the candle burning throughout the dinner conversation.

After dinner or at the beginning, the M.C. invites and encourages guests to discuss the main features of their faith and what it means to them personally. The M.C. should ensure that every member at the table has an opportunity to speak. Debate about spiritual beliefs or practices is strictly forbidden. All questions and statements should be respectful and intended to increase understanding.

“I felt awkward with a lot of the dinner directions. They are not me, and seemed to interrupt what was happening. I went with the flow of conversation and just used a couple of the questions when I needed them.”

The emphasis is on what the individuals who attend believe. No one should be challenged about the politics, history or world events associated with the faiths they represent. Ideally, the eight guests will form a connection that fosters both understanding and respect for each other’s beliefs. The topic of conversation is covered later under the heading, **Guiding the Dinner Discussion.**

A successful Faith-to-Faith dinner is one that everyone wishes to attend again.

At 9:30 p.m., approximately, a Dinner Host extinguishes the light with the words:

“Although this candle is extinguished, the light of understanding that we have shared will remain with all of us”.

The meal is potluck. Basically, the Dinner Hosts provide the entrée and ask the six guests to provide appetizers, salads and dessert. These should be foods that everyone can eat, but all tastes may be represented.

These are guidelines about the dinner menu, but in actual practice, the arrangement often changes during discussions between Dinner Hosts and guests. In 2005, for example, several guests insisted on bringing entrees. The best approach is to start with the guideline, but be flexible. For further information, see page 14.

Guiding the Dinner Discussion

When everyone sits down to dinner, hosts will follow their own sense of what works best, but the following framework is suggested to give a shape and order to the evening.

It consists of three parts: **Introductions, Explanations, and Discussion.**

1. Introductions:

M.C. - "Shall we begin by getting to know each other a little? Would each of you tell us who you are, and two or three things about yourself that you think will help us to know who you are? I'll begin so that you see what I mean. George, nudge me if I take more than three minutes...."

"Who would like to speak next?"

Tip: Nameplates are a useful aid to conversation. Simply fold file cards in half, ask each person to print the name they wish to be called by and place the cards where everyone can see them.

2. Explanations:

M.C. - "Thank you everyone. Now can we move on to discussing our different faiths? I am a stranger to the religions you represent. Could each of you tell us one

important aspect of your faith? George will go first to demonstrate what we mean”... (George describes the diversity of belief within the Unitarian Church and explains his own faith).

M.C. - “Who would like to go next?”

3. Discussion:

M.C. - “Shall we open the discussion now? What more would you like to know about anyone’s faith? May I begin by asking Ali how he practices his faith; what are the responsibilities of an individual in the Islamic faith?”

“Thanks Ali. Who else has a question?”

If time permits, and if it feels appropriate, the Dinner Host leaders might ask guests to share their personally moving spiritual experiences – e.g. “How does it feel to experience the spirit in your faith?”

<p>“I had a person who dominated the conversation and gave a lecture on his religion. I just said, “Can you summarize what you want to say in the next minute so we can hear from everyone else,’ and he did. There has to be equal air-time.”</p>
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These are only suggestions for those approaching an experience like this for the first time. Conditions may restrain your approach or propel it into fascinating waters right from the beginning. Sense what people want and are ready for. If in doubt, ask them. You might begin by outlining the three question areas above and getting everyone’s approval. They may come with ideas of their own, and these should also be heard.

We urge hosts to relax. Our experience is that everyone who attends the dinners is ready to participate. Create an informal and welcoming atmosphere and with a little encouragement the conversation will flow easily.

How Do We Keep Developing The Faith-to-Faith Dinner Program?

This is the beginning. We will make mistakes. In these early stages, feedback to guide the program's development will be of vital importance. For this reason, we ask Dinner Hosts to write their responses to the following questions and send them to the office of the North Shore Unitarian Church, addressed to Faith to Faith Dinners. The questions are:

1. What were the most successful features of your Faith to Faith dinner?
2. What would you do in the future to make the experience better?
3. How can the program be reorganized to facilitate your role as Dinner Hosts?

Responses from guests is also important. For this reason we ask Dinner Hosts to photocopy the questionnaire that appears at the end of this booklet, and to circulate it among their guests following the dinner, leaving enough time for them to respond. If time runs out, as it did in several of the original dinners, please ask your guests to mail their responses to the address provided on the questionnaire. Please assure them that their responses are important for the future of the program.

Any advice arising from any part of the Faith-to-Faith dinner experience will be of great value to the North Shore Unitarian Church and the Multifaith Action Society. As well as responses from Dinner Hosts and guests, we request that Host Committees also provide any information that may prove useful in planning the future of the Faith to Faith dinner program.

Please forward all information to the Faith to Faith program at the North Shore Unitarian Church.



Sample announcement to members of a spiritual centre about hosting Faith-to-Faith dinners

Anyone who wishes to initiate a Faith to Faith dinner program, will have to explain the concept to members of their spiritual centre and seek their cooperation. The following statements provide one way to introduce the program.

“The North Shore Unitarian Church and the Multifaith Action Society of British Columbia are inviting us to become a host centre for their program, **“Faith-to-Faith: Breaking Bread Together for Mutual Understanding.”** They are asking that we volunteer to host small potluck dinners in our homes for six guests representing three different faiths. We have formed a Host Committee and that committee has selected the following spiritual centres from which to invite guests: _____, _____, and _____.

“All members of our Host Committee have chosen to be Dinner Hosts of these Faith-to-Faith dinners. We hope that many of you will also choose to become hosts. If you do, please meet me after the service and give me your names. An orientation meeting will be held on _____ [provide details], and at that meeting we will give you the names and contact numbers for your guests. We will discuss how the dinners will be conducted and suggest guidelines for making them successful.

“We believe this program is a great opportunity for all of us to develop understanding and tolerance in our community. There is also the possibility that what we begin here may become a model of mutual understanding that will spread far beyond our community. We hope you will join us.”

A point to keep in mind when you speak is that the single purpose of the Faith-to-Faith program is to foster mutual understanding.

We suggest that you begin with a small number of hosts. We started with five pairs the first time and moved to ten pairs the second time. We suggest a gradual pattern of growth; the growing tradition will reassure and guide those who follow.

Sample announcement to members of a spiritual centre about becoming guests at Faith-to-Faith dinners

The following statements can be used by either the Host Committee or the spiritual centre leader to invite guests to attend Faith to Faith dinners. The guest centre may have a single leader or a small committee to organize its participation.

“The members of the _____ [place the name of the host spiritual centre here] are inviting us to become a guest centre for a program sponsored by The North Shore Unitarian Church and the Multifaith Action Society of B.C. The program is called **“Faith-to-Faith: Breaking Bread Together for Mutual Understanding.”** They are asking us to be guests at small pot luck dinners held in the homes of their members on the evening of _____ [place the date here]. Six guests representing three different faiths will attend each dinner. We are one of the spiritual centres; the other **two?** are _____ and _____.

“All the members of my committee have chosen to be guests. We hope that many of you will choose to become guests, too. If you do, please meet me after the service. We will all meet at _____ [provide details],

At that meeting we will collect your names and contact numbers to give to your dinner hosts. They will contact you and discuss details of the evening with you. At the meeting we will also

discuss how the dinners will be conducted and work out some guidelines for taking part successfully.

“We believe this program is a great opportunity to nurture understanding and tolerance among us all. There is also the possibility that what we begin here may become a model of mutual understanding that will spread far beyond our community. We hope you will join us.”

When you are speaking, keep in mind that the single purpose of the Faith-to-Faith program is to foster mutual understanding.

Hosting a Faith to Faith Dinner in Your Home: A Summary

Anyone can decide to host a Faith-to-Faith dinner program. Here is a step-by-step outline of the process that you might wish to use.

1. Decide to launch the Faith-to-Faith dinner program.
2. Get copies of the Faith-to-Faith program from the North shore Unitarian Church or the Multifaith Action Society of B.C. by phoning or e-mailing them.
3. Propose the Faith-to-Faith program to the authority in your spiritual centre.
4. Form a small committee to organize the dinners.
5. Present the idea to your spiritual centre population at a holy day meeting, and invite members to host the dinners.
6. Collect the names of volunteer Dinner Hosts and arrange an Orientation Meeting. You may wish to limit the number of volunteers the first time around to ten (or fewer), which would make ten pairs to host five dinners.
7. To solicit guests for the dinners, contact three other spiritual centres of widely different faiths. These become the guest

centres. For example, if you are a Christian community, you might approach a Sikh, Jewish, and Buddhist spiritual centre.

8. Arrange to visit each spiritual centre and make a presentation to the people of each centre. Collect the names and contact information from each spiritual centre **OR** meet with the leaders of each spiritual centre, provide copies of the program, and brief each leader so that he or she can explain the program to the centre's population. Collect the same number of guests as you have hosts – e.g. six guests per host.
9. At the Orientation Meeting for volunteer Dinner Hosts review the guidelines and answer any questions. Provide each pair of Dinner Hosts with the contact information for two people from each of the **three** guest spiritual centres.
10. Soon after the dinners take place, collect the review sheets from the Dinner Hosts, and forward them to the North Shore Unitarian Church or the B.C. Multifaith Action Society.
11. You may wish to arrange a meeting of Dinner Hosts to share experiences, and from that may come a plan to share with others in your spiritual centre population.

How Does a Host Pair Organize a Faith-to-Faith Dinner?

1. Volunteer to host a Faith-to-Faith dinner. Each dinner is hosted by two people who may be either a couple or friends.
2. Attend the Orientation Meeting. Make sure all of your questions are answered. Be sure that you have a copy of the program. Be sure that you know how to conduct the evening, and how to guide the discussion. Take home the contact information about your six guests.
3. Contact each of your guests. Tell them the date and time of the dinner. Tell them what food to bring and how to get to the

place where the dinner will be held. In some cases, language may be a problem. Be very clear about directions. If necessary, ask your guests to meet in an obvious place and travel to the dinner site together.

4. Greet your visitors and collect the food. This informal time milling around may be ideal for introductions and getting to know each other. Name-tags may help.
5. Dinner is for the hosts and guests only. One Dinner Host should act as Master of Ceremony. Light the candle. Break the bread and pass it around the table. And begin the discussion.
6. Near the end of the dinner, circulate the questionnaire provided at the end of this booklet. Collect the questionnaires and send them to the Faith to Faith Program at the Unitarian Church or to the Multifaith Action Society.

What Food Issues Must We Pay Attention To?

People of certain faiths are forbidden to eat certain foods. Always check with your guests. Here are a few guidelines:

Christians, Baha'is, Unitarians

No food limitations. As in any group, some may be vegetarians

Hindus

No beef

Islamics

No pork

Jewish

Some Jews eat only kosher meats; the easiest alternative is a vegetarian meal.

Sikhs

No meat, eggs or alcohol.

Notes: Food should be provided for everyone, but the limits on one person's diet do not limit the diet of others. While one person may not drink, others may, so it is appropriate to provide wine if you wish.

A sheet showing foods forbidden by certain religions is available from the Multifaith Action Society.

We've Already Begun!

The first Faith-to Faith dinners were hosted by people from the North Shore Unitarian Church. Comments by participants in those dinners appear at the beginning of the booklet. We hope you will join us in our efforts to increase mutual understanding and caring among all religions and great tolerance for members of our faith family whose beliefs may be different from our own.

If you find anything incorrect or offensive in this document, please contact the author at mgibbons@sfu.ca, and appropriate corrections will be made. Thank you.

Guest Comments on the Faith-to Faith-Program

Please help us to make the Faith-to-Faith program better. Your comments will guide us. Please use the back of the page if necessary.

1. Which features of your Faith-to-Faith dinner experience did you enjoy the most? What were the highlights for you?

2. What difficulties or discomforts do you think others might experience if they take part in a Faith-to-Faith dinner? Is there something about the Faith-to-Faith program that doesn't work too well?

3. What changes do you think we should make to make the program better and more universal?

4. Do you think that the dinner achieved its goal, to increase understanding and affection among people holding different beliefs? What improvements can we make?

Dinner hosts, please collect these sheets and deliver them to Faith to Faith at the office of the North Shore Unitarian Church, 370 Mathers Avenue, West Vancouver, B.C. V7S 1H3